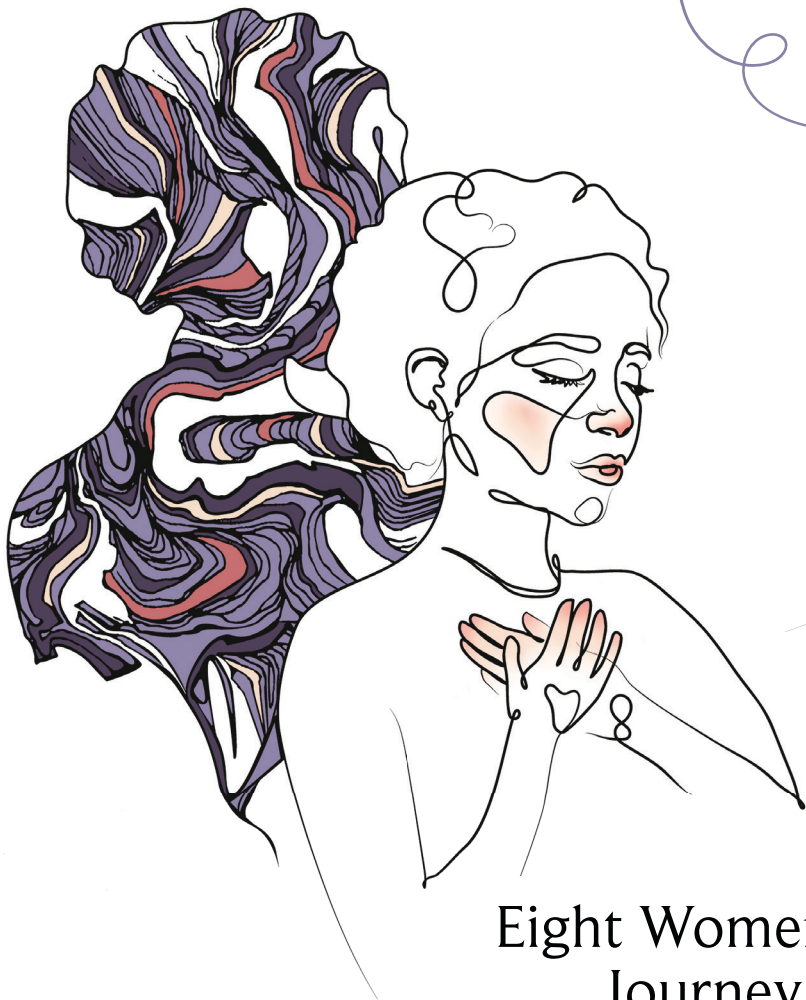


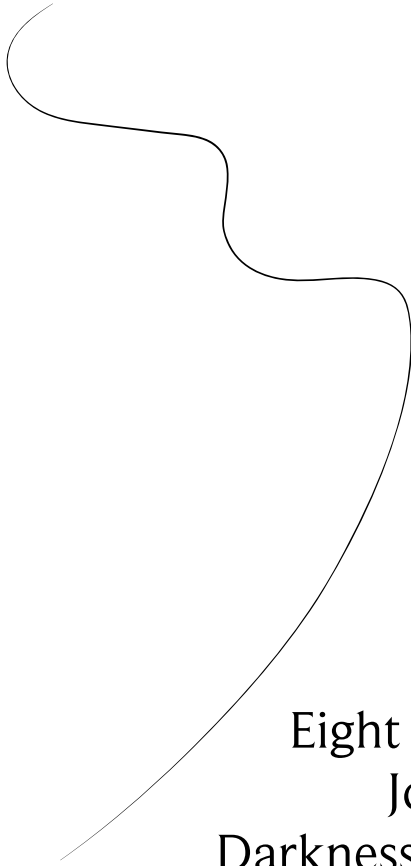
When Life Throws You *A Curve Ball*



Rosie Wee

Eight Women's
Journey From
Darkness To Light

When Life Throws You A Curve Ball



Eight Women's Journey From Darkness To Light

A collaboration between
Singapore After-Care Association (SACA)
and Rosie Wee

**When Life Throws You A Curve Ball:
Eight Women’s Journey From
Darkness To Light**

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1	Foreword
3	Chairman's Message
5	About Rosie Wee
7	Author's Note
10	A Work Of Art

11	Misfit Regina
----	-------------------------

51	Flawed Relationships Bibi
----	-------------------------------------

23	Disruption Letty
----	----------------------------

61	Abusive Relationships Esah
----	--------------------------------------

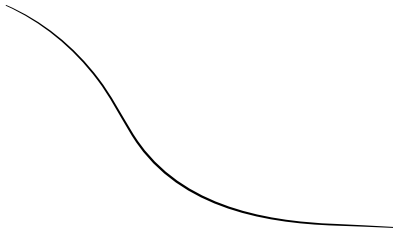
33	Obsessive Love Aminah
----	---------------------------------

71	Alienation Zelda
----	----------------------------

43	Loss Mariam
----	-----------------------

83	Rejection Daisy
----	---------------------------

Foreword



Sundaresh Menon
Chief Justice of Singapore
Patron of SACA

One of the key aims of our criminal justice system is to secure the rehabilitation and reintegration into society of those who have transgressed, but who have the potential to turn over a new leaf. At the heart of this mission is the belief that these ex-offenders deserve a chance to tackle the root causes of their offending and build new lives in our community, free from the shadow of crime. Since its establishment, the Singapore After-Care Association (SACA) has played a central role in this mission, and this important book brings attention to the particular experiences of female ex-offenders who have sought to overcome the many powerful forces that have had a devastating impact on them; to *desist* from surrendering; and to choose instead to make a fresh start after their release from incarceration.

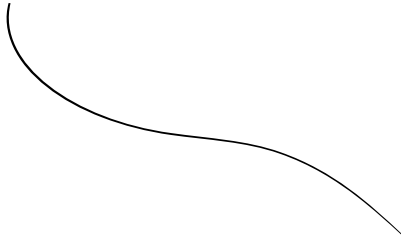
The stories of these eight women shed light on the adversity and fraught personal circumstances that eventually led each of them to fall foul of

the law. But these are also stories of remarkable strength and resilience, and they give reason for hope. They show how difficult it can be to break free from the cycles of addiction, violence, abuse and neglect that often contribute to criminal behaviour – but they also show that, with courage and resolve, these formidable challenges can be overcome.

These stories also illuminate the tremendous power of connection and community in the journey towards healing, rehabilitation and reintegration. Each of the eight women was determined to turn her life around for the sake of her loved ones, and each drew strength from the support and compassion she was shown by the people and organisations that played a part in her journey.

Every person is more than the mistakes she has made, and it is never too late to try to change the ending of one's story. This book offers eight striking examples of this. I commend the author Rosie Wee for capturing these stories with such sensitivity and care; the eight women for their bravery and candour in sharing their experiences; and SACA for its tireless work, its dedication to its mission, and the profound impact it has had on the lives it has touched.

Chairman's Message



Jeffrey Beh
Chairman of SACA

A group that is less spoken about, the stories you read in this book will shed some perspective on the plight of female desistors — in particular, eight of our very own clients whom we had the privilege of journeying with after their release from prison.

The idea of desistance is rooted in the understanding that individuals who have been involved in offending behaviours have the potential to desist from such acts over time. Desistance involves a complex interplay of personal, social and environmental factors, and breaking out of the cycle of offending requires sustained effort and support.

The experience of incarceration casts a shadow on the lives of many of our clients. Oftentimes, it becomes the focus of their identity and for many, it remains as a stigma that follows them through life. But how much do we really know about their lives beyond the label? While choice has a part to play, what ultimately led them down unfavourable paths is most often not based on a singular reason or event.

Each written story may only scratch the surface of their individual realities, but it is enough to show how offending was just a mere fraction of their lives. Amidst being labelled, what also goes unrecognised is their efforts to desist from offending and repeating past mistakes.

To reveal and speak about the deeper parts of ourselves is truly a mark of bravery. I would like to thank the eight women who took the courage to bring us through the different times of their lives. I appreciate their strength and honesty, especially in moments where retelling their stories brought up pain and heartache.

My gratitude also extends to author Rosie Wee. While I recognise that no amount of words can truly capture the weight of our clients' life experiences, Rosie was still able to encapsulate their individual stories meaningfully. I thank her for her time, effort and generosity in writing this book.

As you read about the lives of these eight women, I invite you to see them beyond the chains of offending and incarceration. They are more than the sum of their actions. Every one of us has a part to play in creating a society that is accepting. It need not be grand gestures — a shift in perspective and openness to understand is a good place to start.

If you are a female desistor reading this book, I hope these stories remind you that you are not alone in your journey. Help and support is available to you, and SACA is always here for you.

About Rosie Wee

Rosie Wee was Head of Department (English and Literature) in a secondary school before her retirement. Post retirement, she was an adjunct tutor at the Centre for Language and Communication at NUS from 2006 to 2011.

She has interviewed individuals and documented their stories for the Singapore Memory Project, the National Archives of Singapore, the Organisation of Senior Volunteers (RSVP) and the Singapore Bicentennial.

She is a published author of children's and English books for schools, besides fiction and non-fiction books. She is also the author of a historical novel, *The Heart Remembers*. Published in 2020, *The Heart Remembers* is sold out at Kinokuniya Bookstore and the Changi Chapel and Museum shop. The *Sunday Times* published two of her articles: "A room full of memories in an old mansion" and "A house full of memories in Saunders Road".

As a volunteer, she guides at the National Museum of Singapore, National Gallery of Singapore and Changi Chapel and Museum. She was also an executive member of the Singapore Reading and Literacy Society, in which she held the position of Honorary Treasurer.

Rosie enjoys reading, writing, painting, travelling, and having meals with friends. As a docent, she enjoys telling stories to visitors to the museum.

Author's Note

How reliable is memory? How much do we remember and want to remember? Recalling painful memories is like removing a scab from the wound each time the pain seems to be lessening. And yet, we need to confront the memories to come to terms with the past and to move on. Eight courageous women have stepped up to tell their stories of alienation, loss, abuse, rejection, grief, and shame. They are fractured individuals who lost out in this game of charades and meritocracy. *When Life Throws You A Curve Ball* is a montage of episodic memories. It is about coming to terms with shattered pieces, picking up and rising from the shards. It is about healing and breaking from the addiction bondage.

This book gives voice to the voiceless, hope to the fallen, and encouragement to the desistors. Let this collection be a call out to the community that it takes a village to raise a child; to the educators that education is not about achieving high grades; to the youths that freedom comes with accountabilities and responsibilities; and to those still struggling with addiction that if these women can acquire resilience in adversity, so can they.

I am grateful to these eight women who shared stories of their troubled past. They neither glossed over their misdeeds nor engaged in blame. Their names have been changed to protect their identities. My gratitude also goes to the staff of Singapore After-Care Association (SACA) for collaborating with me in the production of this book – namely Mr Prem Kumar, Director of SACA, Ms Vanessa Anne Suhaimi, staff member, and the following case managers:

1. Anakha Pillay
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3. Allyah Syakirah
4. Roziawati Ibrahim
5. Khairunnisa Nasir
6. Neo Rui Yi

I would also like to thank my test readers who graciously agreed to edit my manuscripts and give me constructive feedback – Ms Julia M. D'Silva, Mrs Lysia Kee, and Mrs Yap Swi Neo.

Rosie Wee

A WORK OF ART

By Rosie Wee

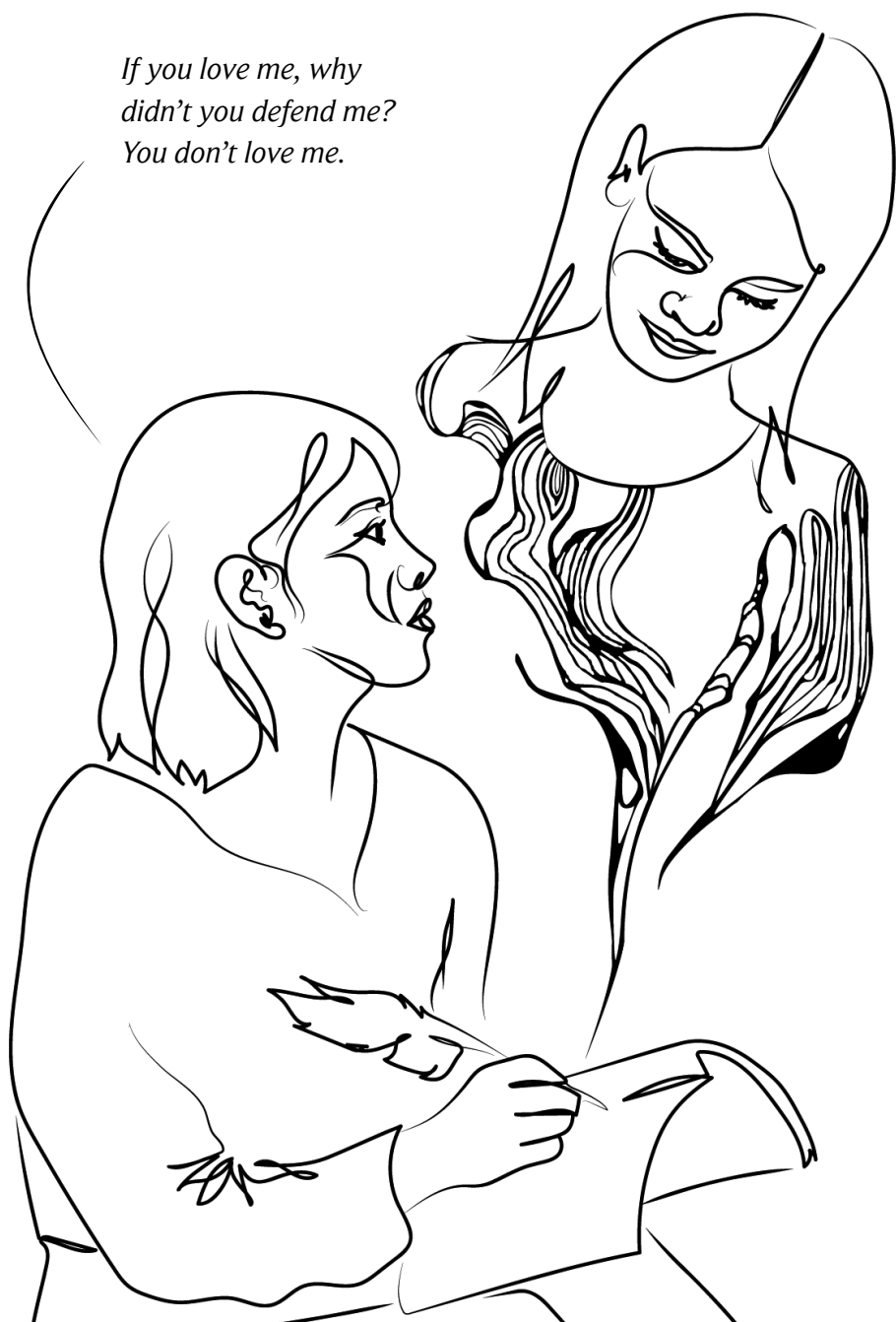
Your lens captured a defining moment.
The pastel lights and streaks of azure over horizon
Draw my eyes and mind to the sweet spot,
The breaking of a new day.

The boardwalk ends in rods of steel.
Lends an air of vanished symmetry;
Like dreams once afresh now shattered,
Leaving smoky embers
In a tissue-wrapped life.

Or is the postcard painting
A renewal of the soul
Having shed the darkness of the night
As dawn breaks the morning.

You must share with me your new techniques,
So tenderly crafted – I was there.

*If you love me, why
didn't you defend me?
You don't love me.*



A stylized, handwritten signature that reads 'Misfit'. The letters are fluid and connected, with a large, sweeping 'M' and a long, trailing 't'.

Regina's story

(Not her real name)

Those words played in my mind like a broken record throughout my growing up years. I addressed it to my dad, who would remain passive while my step-mother continued to torment me. During those days, the word that best described me was 'misfit'.

Philippines

I was a child of mixed parentage; my father was Indian, and my mother was Filipino. I grew up in the region of Ilocos in the Philippines. The place we lived in was unsafe. I witnessed gang fights and heard gunshots. People lived in poverty. We had to move home now and then. Father worked in Singapore and visited us only occasionally. Life was pleasant because I had my mother. She taught me the Tagalog language and would sing Tagalog songs to me. I recall with fondness how she taught me to be kind to others. Once, we were at a shopping mall when a child snatched my packet of popcorn. Mother told me to let her have it, and she bought another pack for me. She taught me to catch fish from the pond and pick fruits. I also had cousins to play with.

My mother passed away when I was five years old. During her last year, her room was converted to look like a hospital room, with a helper to

attend to her. I was not allowed to visit her. I spent most of my time looking out of windows and feeling lonely. After her death, my father and I moved to Singapore.

Singapore

I was seven years old when my father remarried. My step-mother already had a daughter with her from a previous relationship. I could not fit into a life with my step-mother and step-sister. Living with them was a continual nightmare. One day, when I was 12, I woke up with terrible pain in my forehead. Blood was oozing from it. My step-mother had thrown a mug at me to wake me up. *If the teacher asks, tell her you knocked into a cupboard*, she said. Till today, the scar remains. The torment continued. She would pull my ears, hit me with a broomstick and scald me with coffee while father kept his distance.

I had difficulty adjusting to school life. With mixed parentage and coming from a different background, I was a misfit and seen as an alien because of my tomboyish appearance – short curls and dark complexion. My classmates shunned me. Also, I could speak and read only Tagalog. So, learning the English language was a struggle. We had to take up a second language, and because my father was Indian, I was given Tamil, which was beyond me. I performed badly, and this pulled down my overall Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) score. Most of my classmates were streamed into Express classes while, to my disappointment, I entered the Normal Stream.

Secondary school wasn't any better. Classmates would bully me by posting my unattractive pictures on Facebook and then humiliating me

with abusive language like, *look at her; isn't she pretty?* My father also showed favouritism towards my step-sisters as they were able to enter the Express Stream. A sense of worthlessness and low esteem began to set in.

As a misfit, I would seek solace by spending time in the library. Books and stories became my comforter and the library my refuge. I would read science, history, and literary books widely. Literature was my favourite subject. My favourite authors ranged from Enid Blyton to Stephen King. I also listened to music, which developed into a passion. As a form of escape from harsh reality, I engaged in fantasy. I was fascinated by the comic character Harley Quinn. I even had a heart tattoo on my cheek, just like her.

I completed my Secondary Four N-level exams but decided to go to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) instead of moving on to take my O-levels. It was a mistake as I could not fit into the environment. Many students were bullies, especially toward special needs students. I took a gap year to work part-time as a cashier in Pastamania. My opportunity to study overseas came when my father agreed to sponsor me. At 18, I left for Australia to pursue an education in Hospitality.

Australia

Studying in Australia was a good change of environment from my life with toxic people in Singapore. Life was good until I met my boyfriend, X, an Australian of Arab descent. I was at the train station when I heard a voice. *Hey pretty lady, you wanna grab dinner with me?* Not long after, we got into a relationship. I stayed with five others in a house, and we had a room each.

After co-habiting with him for a few months, I discovered intimate messages in his phone from women. When I confronted him, he told me I had no right to check on his private life. He was playing a double game and cheating on me. The relationship became strained, but having been a misfit, unloved and unwanted in Singapore, I wasn't ready to give him up. I was starved for love. No one had ever told me I was pretty and desirable. The relationship continued until I was in the car with him one day, and he was driving. A quarrel ensued. In the heat of an argument, he stopped the car, leaned over to open my door, and then pushed me out. He drove off, leaving me bleeding. It was then that I decided to pack up and return to Singapore. I asked for a deferment from my college but never went back.

Singapore

Life in Singapore meant having to put up with my step-mother again. One day, I came back late from a night out. She was furious and started calling me names. *Why did you come back? You should have killed yourself, you prostitute.* Next, she grabbed a chair and flung it at me. I ran out of the house and made a report at the police station. I received a Personal Protection Order (PPO). Father told me to drop the case.

As I was not getting support from my father, I was plagued with depression and thoughts of suicide crossed my mind. In despair, I checked myself into the Institute of Mental Health (IMH). I was diagnosed with personality disorder and given medication and counselling. When things did not improve in the home, I became increasingly suicidal. One day, I popped an overdose of anti-depressant pills and had to be hospitalised. At another time, I took the lift to the 17th floor of a building to end my life. I climbed over the railing, but when I looked down, I saw

a little girl walking with her mother, who was holding her. A vision of me with my mother flashed, and I decided not to jump as I would have traumatised the little girl. My late mother's spirit must have stopped me. I was 19 years old.

My dad was my last link, but I felt betrayed and unwanted when he distanced himself from me. I turned rebellious, defiant, and wild. It was my way of dealing with a world that didn't care. The people I mixed with were equally wild and rebellious. One of them had a criminal record. We would hang out in nightclubs and bars, drink and while the night away. Our conversations could go like this:

Do you have any plans?

Let's do something crazy.

How about skinny dip into the Singapore River?

I joined a group of girls who taught me how to steal clothes from department stores. We would scratch the barcode with a black marker and then deactivate the sensor in the tag with an electronic magnet before detaching it. This went on until the security guard caught one of us. We were at Mustafa, and she was high on medication mixed with alcohol. The security guard called the police, and I was locked up for two days and then brought to IMH. Father bailed me out.

In November 2020, I was charged with trespassing. It happened in a café. I was high on medication and alcohol, so the incident was fuzzy. I saw a

mobile hanging with stars and a post-it note with the wording *the key is in the stars*. I saw a key hanging there when I looked up at the mobile. So, I reached out for it. I tried opening the doors around me, and one of them did open. The police came and arrested me. The next thing I knew, I was in a hospital bed. I must have blacked out. I was on an intravenous drip, and my right ankle was cuffed to the bedpost. Father bailed me out, but the court put me on probation for 24 months. I found it very intrusive as I was frequently hounded by the probation officer, having to report to her intermittently. I breached my probation and was rearrested and charged in court. The judge sentenced me to one year in the Reformative Training Centre, Changi Prison.

Prison

I had difficulty fitting in with my cellmates in prison. They saw me as different. I wasn't a drug addict and didn't speak their language, usually about drug-related stuff. So, they threw words like *stuck up and show off* at me. The needle marks on their arms also repulsed me. Once, I even got into a fight with them. As a loner, I spent my time reading books.

Reinventing Destiny

I decided I didn't want to live like my cellmates in prison. I had to relook at my life and plan for a better future, as my incarceration was only one year. A few factors also made me do an about-turn in my life.

There was a prison staff who was very encouraging. She saw potential in me, which gave me hope. Our conversations could go like this:

Why are you in prison? You are not supposed to be here.

I messed up.

I don't want to see you here again.

My father visited me in prison. I remembered the meeting with him. He was seated before the glass panel that divided us. The air was thick, weighted by his presence. His hair was dishevelled. *Sorry, Bapa is sorry*, he stammered. A teardrop glistened on his cheek. He apologised to me for not being there for me, for my past sufferings living with my step-mother, and he promised to be a more effective father. He told me he would divorce my step-mother.

My mother's spirit is still watching over me, and she would not want to see me mess up my life again. I want her to be proud of me. I had to put my life in order.

I saw education as a pathway to a better life for me. I am currently sitting for my O-levels. I plan to obtain a diploma in music, and, eventually, a degree in music production.

Organisations like SACA have been helping me, and I have to live up to their expectations. I am now working in an F&B outlet and people including customers have been encouraging. They have remained my supporters who believe in me and give me affirmation, but most of all, I must have faith in myself and my abilities.

In five years, I see myself working in a music production company as a DJ.

A Letter to Mother

Dear Mama,

It's been a while since you were called home to the Lord and I wonder what you think of me today, almost 20 years later. Are you proud of me? Do you think I would've been different if you were here? There are times I wish you would hold me and make this empty feeling in my chest go away.

You were here for my first steps, my first words and my first day at kindergarten; but what about my first day of secondary school, my first period, my first boyfriend and subsequent heartache? Would I have made the wrong choice of friends if you had been here? Would I have even turned to a life of crime if I still had you in my life? There are so many questions left unanswered.

I am a reformed person now. I have a stable job, I'm back in school and I hope to get my degree just as you've always wanted for me. Would you send me a sign? You are constantly in my thoughts and prayers.

Loving you always,

Your Loving Daughter

Regina



Commentary

In this opening chapter, recounting Regina's experience, we are told the story of a life troubled by adversity. Regina reflects on the complexities of her circumstances surrounding issues of identity, stepfamily relationships, and mental health challenges – but also hope for redemption through the transformative power of self-reinvention.

The chapter takes us through Regina's upbringing, beginning with her mixed-parentage birth in the Philippines, re-location to Singapore and experiences of abuse and marginalisation. A life of petty crime follows and eventual imprisonment not far behind. The fragmented nature of Regina's identity and psyche is marked by traumatic relationships, and social and cultural alienation. Her physical relocation, through Singapore, Australia, and back, speaks of her failed quest for belonging and actualisation.

Central to her difficulties are the complexities of identity formation and family relationships. The loss of her mother at a young age leaves a lasting void, creating in her intense feelings of loneliness and abandonment. The introduction of the step-mother and step-sister further complicates Regina's sense of belonging, not helped by the abuse, neglect, and emotional turmoil that followed her. The strained relationship with her father foregrounds her sense of betrayal, and exacerbates her longing for male validation and acceptance.

While the Australia experience initially offers Regina some hope of that acceptance, this soon descended into disillusion – and a different kind of abusive relationship. This reminder of past trauma and unmet emotional needs leads to her decision to return to Singapore. From here, one thing leads to another, which ultimately lands her in legal trouble and incarceration.

In prison, Regina confronts the stark reality of a bleak future – and the need for change. This is helped by the supportive interactions she receives while serving her sentence. The pivotal moment of reconciliation with her father marks a genuine turning point, cementing Regina’s commitment to self-improvement and the pursuit of a brighter future.

Education will be an important source of this transformation. Despite her struggles, Regina has shown a keen interest in learning and personal growth. Singapore’s educational opportunities, even for those with difficult backgrounds, can provide learners like her with a sense of achievement and dignity. Regina herself realises that education and eventual employment will be a key to providing her with structure and a sense of purpose.

The chapter also gives an account of Regina’s struggles with mental health issues, including depression,

suicidal thoughts, and personality difficulties. Her account of institutional responses to mental illness – from the Institute of Mental Health to the criminal justice system – casts attention on the pervasive stigma and challenges of providing suitable support and resources for people grappling with mental health challenges.

Issues of abuse and family dynamics in general are more difficult to address. And Regina’s own experience demonstrates the need to protect the vulnerable, provide first-response support for victims of abuse, including legal assistance, shelter, and counselling services. Community-based initiatives can also provide a safe space for individuals to seek support and healing from past trauma.

Organisations like SACA have played a crucial role in providing support and pastoral care. By cultivating a network of peers, mentors, and

allies, Singaporean society can help persons such as Regina realise their aspirations, not just for social reintegration, but also active and productive participation.

Regina's journey towards self-awareness and healing unfolds through moments of despair but also resilience. Whether her attempts to reclaim agency and self-reinvention will be successful remains to be seen. But her reflexive turn compels us to root for her.

AP Lim Lee Ching

Dean

S R Nathan School of Human
Development, Singapore University
of Social Sciences

Assistant Honorary Treasurer,
SACA Executive Committee

*If you stay in someone's
place, you have to adapt.*



Disruption

Letty's story (Not her real name)

Those were the words of my late father. He was trying to get me to accept my circumstances. But how does a young child accept continual upheavals in her life? My life was frequently disrupted because I was sent from one home to another and one school to another. I received neither security nor stability from the adults in my life.

My parents divorced when I was very young. Mother remarried, and I did not see her until much later. Father had custody of me. He was a general operator in a factory. As my father had to work, I was left in the care of my paternal grandmother, step-grandfather, and their extended family. I was attached to my grandmother but not the others. I had to carry out chores like washing the shoes of my cousins. My step-grandfather would make me massage him, and when I refused, he would beat me. Whenever there were fights over toys with my cousins, I would be beaten. I had to move from one relative's home to another as keeping me in the family was a burden to them. I looked forward to the few times when my father visited and took me out for a show or a meal.

There was a happy period when I was living with my paternal grandmother. She was the only one who showed love for me. When I was seven, she let me sell packets of *nasi lemak*, *curry puff* and *kueh*, which she would buy from a vendor. On the first day, she held my hand and walked me down the steps of our HDB flat to the void deck. Together we set up our 'stall'. The display of the food attracted customers from various races, including some Chinese aunties. *You smile and greet them to get their attention*, she said. From them, I learnt to speak basic Chinese. Grandma also helped me to save some money from the sales. She had a food stall at Taman Jurong food court. I would help her in the morning before leaving for school in the afternoon.

My primary school days were unstable. I changed schools several times because of my frequent moves from one relative's home to another. In one incident, my step-grandfather punched me for fighting with an aunt who was only a few years older than me. I bled and couldn't speak. Father took me out and put me in another relative's home. There I was molested by an 'uncle'. My father then decided to let me stay with him. I was 11 years old.

Life with father wasn't any better. He was away from home most of the time. Money was lacking, and whenever he was frustrated, he would take it out on me by beating me using whatever he could get hold of – cane, belt, stick or even metal bar. Father spent money on himself and would frequent Batam. Loan sharks also harassed us. Life became so unbearable that I left the flat whenever he was around. I would hang out at void decks to avoid him. Those days I could turn to no one, and no one cared.

*

My life began to spiral downward after I failed my PSLE. Afraid that my father would beat me, I ran away from home. My father and his friend found me and brought me back. The school wanted me to retake my PSLE. I was transferred to another school. By then, I had lost interest in my studies. Over time, I became increasingly rebellious.

My friends were those who hung out with me at void decks, including my schoolmates. We would engage in smoking, alcohol drinking and graduated to inhaling cocaine and marijuana. Gang rivalry and fights were typical. One day, I beat up a Chinese boy outside the school. On the second day, he brought his gang to confront me. When they saw that I was a female, they walked off. My father gave up on me and allowed me to quit school without repeating my PSLE.

*

By the age of 17, I was already a hard-core drug addict. Life was rounds of drug and alcohol consumption. Money from my part-time work in a factory was insufficient, so to feed my addiction, I resorted to drug trafficking. It didn't take long for men from the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) to track and arrest me. In seven years and four months, I was incarcerated four times.

The need for money also led me into a sham marriage. In 2006 when I was 30 years old, X approached me to 'marry' him. In return for a sum of

\$5,000, I agreed. He planned to register our marriage and then apply for an HDB flat. He was the owner, and I was registered as co-occupant. We lived separately after the marriage but remained married in principle. After three years, he sold the flat for a profit and divorced me.

Reinventing Destiny

In 2018, while incarcerated in Changi Prison, I reflected deeply on my past life. Circumstances had shaped my life, but I was also responsible for making the choices. Some motivations led me to decide that *enough is enough, and I can't be living a life of addiction and being in and out of prison.*

The first motivation was having Adam (not his real name) in my life. Adam was born out of wedlock. In 1996 when he was still a baby, his unwed mother, a drug addict, offered him to me for adoption. My father adopted him legally, but I love him as my own. We refused to change his surname to ours because we wanted him to know that although he is an adopted child, he is loved. Adam was left in my father's care and a friend's care whenever I was incarcerated. Father would bring him to visit me. One day, we were on a bus travelling past Changi Prison when four-year-old Adam said this:

There.

What?

You – naughty.

Although we tried to give Adam a normal life, it was not always so. He grew up with an adopted 'sister' who had been in and out of prison, and an adopted father who was constantly in debt. Occasionally, Adam would be stressed by loan sharks who demanded payment. Yet he did not take after both of us. He studied hard, avoided drugs, and passed his exams. Today, 28-year-old Adam is working as a data officer in a bank. In 2019 my father passed on. I am determined to be a good role model to Adam so that he will not be disappointed with me. Adam must never take after me or my father. I want to see him grow up well and live a purposeful life. He is my pride and joy. I hope to own a flat and live with Adam as a family. Adam is one of the reasons I decided to change.

The second reason is when I saw the change in my father nearer the end of his life. When he visited me in prison in 2018, I saw that time was running out for him. His faded shirt hung loosely with the top unbuttoned, and sleeves rolled part way up, exposing a skeletal frame. His skin was thin, his voice raspy and his breath wheezy. He brought the Quran, and his words were: *Pray... take good care of Adam... look out for each other...* I was touched that, despite his illness, he visited me.

Prison gave me compassionate leave to visit my father when he was in ICU and later to attend his funeral. I felt remorseful for not spending more time with him. Regardless of what I went through with him, he was still my father. As a daughter and a Muslim, I have to do good, forgive him, let go and pray for him.

The decision to forgive my mother and to reconcile with her motivated me to change. My mother left me when I was a toddler. I never experienced a mother's love, never knew who my mother was. She married an Indonesian and left Singapore after her divorce from my father. In 1994 my aunt (mother's sister) arranged for an overseas call for me to speak to my mother. My feelings were mixed. How do I forgive and reconcile with a mother who abandoned me and never tried to get in touch over the years? Yet it was through forgiveness that healing could take place. It was a short call. We exchanged some pleasantries. In May of the same year, I did get to meet her in person with help from my father. It was in a hotel in Medan on my 18th birthday.

"Happy birthday," a soft voice said. Standing before me was a petite lady.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because I'm your mother," she said.

My long-awaited meeting with my mother finally took place. She gave me a gift and a card. To this day I still treasure them. Since then, my mother and her family have relocated to Singapore. We are still in touch either in person or over video call.

The fourth motivation was the realisation that I had done wrong and paid for it, but it did not mean I was useless and worthless. There was hope for me. While in prison, I made up for lost time by resuming my studies. I completed my N-level exams and obtained the certificate.

I'm still recovering from a motorcycle accident, but I have hope for the future. Having worked as a chef before, I plan to tap into my culinary skills after my recovery. I aspire to be a certified chef in a food and beverage outlet.

People and organisations like Yellow Ribbon and SACA have been helping me, and I should not disappoint them. I'm still receiving counselling from Nisa, my case manager. I'm telling my story as a way of paying forward.

I have this to say to those still struggling with addiction:

Try to look at the positive side. No matter how gloomy the situation is, life is still beautiful. Just because you failed doesn't mean you will fail again. Put faith in yourself, believe in yourself and pull through. Opportunities are there, but you lose them if you don't grab them.

Commentary

In the brief yet impactful narrative of Letty's life, a profound connection to my own family and past stirred within me, bringing me close to tears. The intricate dance between family as a protective shield and a potential risk factor is a dynamic many of us navigate. While, for most, family acts as a steadfast protective force, for individuals like Letty and myself, it can manifest as a risk factor. Letty's journey, marked by apparent hardships inflicted by family dynamics, has not only shaped her into a remarkably resilient person, it also underscores the courage required to forgive those who have caused her pain.

Letty's story resonates with the transformative power of resilience and the strength needed to reconstruct one's life, particularly when faced with limited resources. The path she treads, often a solitary one, is a testament to her fortitude. Amidst life's challenges, Letty imparts a valuable lesson – to

focus on the positive aspects, to find beauty in even the gloomiest situations, and to recognize that failure does not dictate future outcomes. Her unwavering faith in herself and her ability to seize opportunities, even in the face of adversity, embody a spirit that refuses to surrender.

Letty's journey is a beacon of perseverance, showcasing her refusal to give up on herself. Her optimism radiates, fuelled by a renewed connection with her adopted family, her father, mother, and a profound relationship with God, guiding her towards the profound act of "reinventing" her destiny.

The use of support networks, such as Yellow Ribbon and SACA, in Letty's narrative, offers a strategic lesson in navigating life's curveballs. Recognising and leveraging available assistance is vital when confronted with a myriad of challenges in life,

and Letty's experience serves as a valuable guide.

For Letty's courageous sharing of her story, I extend my gratitude and admiration. Letty, your resilience, positive outlook, and motivation, rooted in the rekindling of relationships and faith, are truly astonishing.

AP Timothy Sim

Head of Programme,
Master of Counselling
S R Nathan School of Human
Development, Singapore University
of Social Sciences
Assistant Honorary Secretary,
SACA Executive Committee

*The next guy I meet,
I will marry him.*



Obsessive Love

Aminah's story

(Not her real name)

After a few failed relationships, I made that resolution. It turned out to be a self-fulfilled prophecy. One wrong decision led to another, and my life spiralled down. Drugs became my comforter, my weapon, and eventually my enemy.

It all started as puppy love. We were from the same neighbourhood, and I was attracted to X when we were still children. Then we lost touch until someone passed the phone to me one day. It was him on the other end, and I became all excited. It was to this pleasure-loving man that I attached my life at the age of 24. That one decision set the tone for my nightmarish life after that.

He was a womaniser, and I would spend empty nights waiting for him to come to me. I had to beg him for sex. It was during moments of despair, loneliness, and sexual deprivation that I resorted to drugs. Someone told me if I wanted to make myself desirable to my husband, I could try taking drugs. She did warn me that I would be taking it at my own risk. I told myself if drugs could meet my desires, why not. As expected, I became hooked.

I knew he was not good for me, but I was already pregnant with his child and still in love with him. I wanted desperately to win his love. That desperation manifested in feeding him with drugs. Under the influence of drugs, we would engage in sexual intimacy. I believed that I could control his mind and body with drugs.

Life with X became a series of nightmares. With the birth of our second child and still under the influence of drugs, debts stacked against me while he remained irresponsible and even disappeared from my life. But my husband was my whole world. I was so obsessed with X that I neglected the children and disregarded my parents' advice to divorce him. My obsessive love was a force that I couldn't overcome.

Addiction and consumption of drugs inevitably led to arrest and incarceration for both of us. When I was arrested the first time, my daughter was eight years old and my son three. I was in my room when men from the CNB came for me. My children were at home. A neighbour alerted my mother, who came and took the children away. My heart ached for them when I saw their bewildered looks.

Life did not improve after my release. Financial problems continually plagued me. I had to pay for the installments of my flat, the furniture, and the day-to-day living expenses. My husband did not help and continued in his wayward ways. Things just got worse. Because we could not pay for the furniture installments, the staff from Courts took away the furniture. My desire for my husband was still strong. When my world collapsed, I was warded at the National University Hospital and then at the IMH.

I remember pulling out the drips. Blood splattered, so they tied me up. *I want my husband*, I screamed.

One day, upon my discharge from an operation, my mother-in-law pressured me to let my husband into the flat because we were joint owners. The pressure and the mounting debts led to a relapse. I resorted to drugs to numb the pain, resulting in a second arrest and incarceration. This time, my daughter was 11 and my son six.

The first incarceration was not too impactful on me. I was bitter and angry. My first reaction was, *my husband should be in prison, not me*. My parents and children visited. Mother would tell the children I couldn't go home because I was in the hospital.

*

From a young age, I had preferred the company of boys and was far from being an obedient and docile daughter. My father's way of showing love was to discipline me with a *rotan*¹. He would whack me whenever he disapproved of my behaviour, but that didn't stop me from doing naughty stuff. I lied; I played truant by skipping my religious class. Instead of going for tuition, I would go swimming by stuffing my swimming costume in my school bag. So, the whacking continued when my father found out. Initially, I was frightened and resentful, but the continual beating developed into a hardened heart and skin.

1 cane

The beating continued when I entered secondary school. One day, the school brought me and a group of classmates to the police station for truancy and theft. My father went to the police station and slapped me in front of everyone. Today, I bear no ill feelings towards him. I deserved the beating because of my bad behaviour.

The one who loved me was my great-grandmother. Occasionally she would shield me from the beating and give me money. My parents divorced when I was 18.

★

My primary school days were largely unhappy. The teachers were indifferent, and my Malay classmates disliked me. They would *sabo*² me by pretending to let me join them in the National Day dance, then change the steps to confuse me. I became cautious of them and moved towards the Chinese.

In secondary school, my cravings for acceptance and attention took centre stage. I was much happier in secondary school, but my truancy continued. We would go to school, ensure the teacher marked our attendance, and then disappear. The school was newly built, and we were the pioneer batch. We would escape to the upper deck, where the classrooms were still empty, to smoke. I started smoking when I was in Secondary 1. My classmates and I would hide in the toilet to smoke. Sometimes we would leave home in our uniforms, skip school, and appear

in the shopping mall or bowling alley in our home clothes. Occasionally, we would be caught by the discipline master, and my parents would be called up. This would result in more beatings from my father. It didn't matter anymore as I was immune to it by then.

My father made a pact with me when I reached Secondary 4 Normal-level. *You complete your N level first; then you can do what you like with your life*, my father told me one day. I took his word for it and obtained my GCE N-level certificate. I tried to do a course at the ITE but quit after a year. Their rules were too strict. Having lost interest in my studies, I decided to work for a living.

*

Money from selling clothes in a department store gave me the means to splurge. As a young adult, free from my father's interference and beatings, I was determined to live life to the fullest and my way. I started hanging out with fun-loving friends. We would go clubbing, drinking, and visit Kuala Lumpur and Batam.

As day turned to night, my life was rounds of disco lights, music, booze, crass jokes, and clinking of glasses. One night, I became so drunk in the disco that my father had to pick me up. On another occasion, I went to work with a heavy hangover and realised I wore my *baju terbalik*³. Occasionally, colleagues had to wake me up. We were not into drugs then, but just having fun and a great time.

*

It was during the second incarceration that I finally reflected on my life – my children, the mess I was in, my woes and the guilt suffocating me. It was also a moment of reckoning. It occurred to me that I might lose my children if imprisoned for a third time. I told myself, *Aminah, no kids anymore if you don't change.*

I resolved to fight my demons for myself, my children, and those who still believed in me. I told my cellmates I shouldn't be here; I should be earning a living for my children and giving them a normal life.

Prison life was spartan but acceptable. I minded my own business and avoided trouble. When my cellmates tried to *sabo* me, I asked for a transfer to another cell. The prison also provided a programme for me to work towards rehabilitation and recovery.

I met my husband's girlfriend, an inmate, while in prison. The meeting did not generate rage or jealousy but indifference. Then, I realised I had accepted my failed marriage and traumatic life with him. I had to divorce him, fight for custody of my children, and work towards full ownership of our flat. It would be a long and winding road, but I had taken the first step towards a divorce.

Without the people who helped me, I would not be where I am today. My parents never gave up on me. They continued to visit me. My mother took care of my kids when I was in prison. My children's school also helped with counselling my children and giving us financial support.

When the prison tried to match me with a job upon my release, I opted to return to the job I was comfortable in – a call operator. I called my former boss to tell him I wanted to return to my job, and he accepted. Today, my boss and colleagues continue to be supportive of me. I see myself as part of their family.

Organisations have helped me to recover and provided counselling. I was referred to SACA for support. Case managers addressed my rehabilitation needs and coordinated social support services and counselling. My counsellor, Anakha, helped me to fill in forms, listened to me, supported me, and did not judge me. I am very thankful to her.

Today, I am still working at my life, but I have come a long way from those dark nights. My husband is still harassing me, but it doesn't affect me anymore.

I'm not proud of my wild life, and I'm sorry for the suffering I caused to my children and family members. Still, I have learnt to be kind to myself, and feel blessed that life has given me a second chance. I am grateful to organisations like SACA and the people who have helped and are still helping me.

In five years, I see myself living with my children in a fully paid home and even having a helper as my parents are getting old.

I have this to say to those out there who are still struggling with addiction. *Stay strong for those you value and love, live a life of gratitude and live up to the expectations of those who love you.*

Commentary

I was lucky. That was the thought that kept resonating with me when I read Aminah's story. There were many turns in my life that could've made me go astray and end up being addicted or incarcerated.

I was lucky to have a supportive family that didn't implement tough punishments when, like Aminah, I played truant to go swimming with my classmates. I got caught by my mother, and instead of punishing me, she asked if I was ok. Tears streamed down my cheeks out of guilt because I knew I had been naughty and was supposed to be punished. That incident taught me not to let my mother down again. There were many times I looked back and wondered, if they were tougher on me, would I have become a rebellious and wayward kid?

I was also lucky to have good teachers who were passionate about teaching and empowered me in many ways. They believed in

building strong character instead of just pursuing good academic results. The primary school teacher I remembered the most enthralled us with many stories during his Chinese lessons that taught us valuable lessons in life. That prompted me to read more and encouraged me to take up responsibilities, which allowed me to pick up many organisational and leadership skills that shaped my self-employed career.

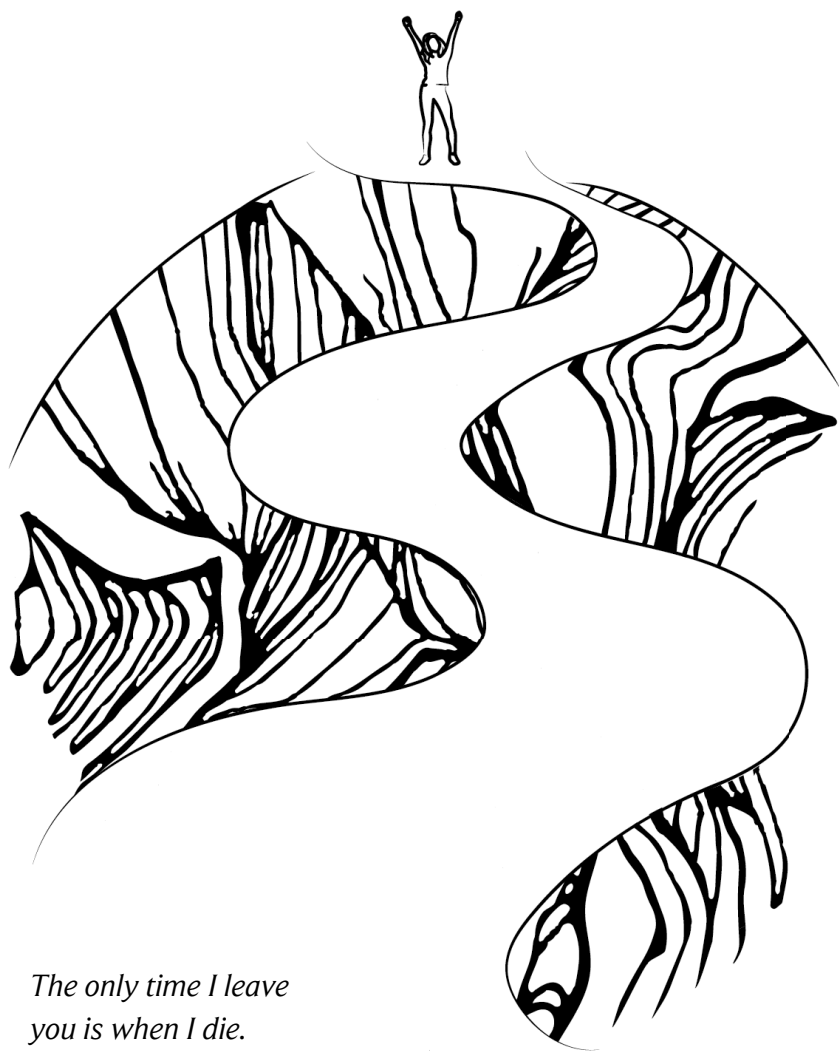
But it was also scarily relatable when I read the parts on Aminah's obsessive love for the husband. As a woman, I had my fair share of finding love in the wrong places, which led to a period of depression. I wouldn't have seen light at the end of the tunnel without supportive friends who helped and encouraged me to seek professional help.

Now, I am with M who was previously incarcerated, and I was reminded again how lucky I was to grow up in

a healthy environment. His rough childhood led him to find solace in the company of secret society members, who provided a sense of identity and belonging during his formative years. Following this was a long story of violence, crime, and addiction, a story that came straight out of a drama series or movie, a story that came from a world that is very different from mine. When he first opened up to me about the abuses he suffered as a child, how he went to school hungry every day, and how he had to protect and provide for his brothers by stealing for them made my heart bleed for him. No children should have to go through that! What I see in him, is not a violent ex-offender, but a child who needs much love, nurturing, and protection. It has been tough as a partner, supporting him through his reintegration into society and his fight against his demons. Reading Aminah's story made me reflect, was it obsessive love or the hope that one can truly heal and change their

ways? I think, only time can tell. It takes a village to raise a child. Like the majority of us, I was lucky to be in a healthy ecosystem that guided me to become who I am today. But it is not the case for many who have come from troubled families and are surrounded by vices. There is so much more we can do to protect and nurture the young ones and rehabilitate those who were incarcerated, instead of passing judgement or discriminating against those who had fallen through the cracks.

Ms Renee Chua



*The only time I leave
you is when I die.*



Mariam's story

(Not her real name)

Those were the words from X, my partner. It came true when she died in August 2021. What do you do when life throws you a curveball, not once but twice? Do you crumble, or do you rise from the ashes?

At 7am, while I was at work, my text pinged.

Someone from your block is lying on the ground; your girlfriend? The text was from my brother's friend.

Can't be; I just saw her. I texted back.

I did not go home to check; I carried on with my job in Shopee. *It cannot be, it cannot be*, the tragic movie reel kept pounding in my mind – the quarrel the night before, her erratic behaviour, her text messages threatening to leave me. Reality hit me only when the police confirmed it was X. *If only pain and guilt could float away.* I said to myself. I had to undergo grief counselling.

I met X when we were both incarcerated in Changi Prison in 2014. I found her interesting and sincere. Our friendship developed over time. When I was released in 2018, she was there to receive me. After dating her for some time, we lived in a rental flat for three years.

X was my friend, partner, and soulmate. I was an introvert, and she was the only one I could relate to. She would comfort me during hard times, stand by me, and be a pillar of strength. So, losing her was devastating. I moved back to live with my parents after X's death.

My relationship with my mother used to be strained, but I drew closer to her after my trauma over my partner's death. Little did I expect fate to throw another curveball that soon. In December 2022, the travel agency called my father to inform him that my mother had passed away suddenly in Madrid. She was on holiday with her brother and sister-in-law. As there was no post-mortem, the cause of death was conveniently documented as Covid-19. She was buried in Valencia. There was no closure for me.

*

I came from a family of five – parents, myself and two siblings. I was the eldest and constantly looked upon to set a good example. My brother was three years younger, and my sister was eight years younger. I got along well with my brother, but sharing a room with my sister made me resentful. My sibling relationship with her was almost nonexistent.

My father was a company driver, and my mother was a housewife. There was no bonding with father as he was hardly there for us. Mother nagged

continually at us and at father when he was around. One day, I discovered some weird objects in the toilet. When I brought it to show my mother, she dismissed it as rubbish and took it away. In my adult years, I realised it was drug-related stuff. Mother would cover up instead of telling the truth. Only when we were adults did she reveal that my father was a drug addict and was in and out of prison. He was also a womaniser. My mother remained the long-suffering wife.

*

I was a loner and an introvert in school, but I was not rebellious. I did well academically and fondly remember the school camp I attended. My parents would reward me for good grades, and I was determined to work for the rewards.

Life in secondary school went smoothly except for one particular incident. I wanted to drop my A Math, but my teacher felt otherwise, so the school called for my parents. Having an absent father didn't help. *Just tell the principal your father is dead*, mother said. I did as I was told, but the principal doubted it. So, she called for my mother. In the presence of all, my mother denied telling me about my father's death. It was then that I lost faith and respect for her. I was also fed up with her constant nagging. *He brings you trouble, and you take it out on us. You live with your choice*; I told her off.

In Secondary 2, I worked part-time at McDonald's. Work gave me a sense of achievement in addition to the money. I continued working until age twenty and was promoted from part-time crew to full-time, then crew

leader, floor manager, and assistant manager. My relationship with my colleagues was good. We would hang out at various outlets.

At 16, I felt stifled by my mother's control, and I left home to hang out with friends. We would sleep in void decks and open spaces. My father brought me back, and from then on, I was allowed more freedom to stay away from home.

*

It was my brother who introduced me to drugs. He was a drug addict in and out of prison like my father.

After I left McDonald's, where I had worked for 25 years, I decided to try other jobs and was employed in a sales job. On the second day, I felt ill and requested leave to see a doctor. I was given three days of medical leave. To my surprise, the manager sacked me instead of accepting the doctor's medical chit. In frustration, I resorted to the drugs I obtained from my brother. I wasn't hooked but took drugs intermittently.

One day, my brother's friend couldn't contact him, so he turned to me to get him the drugs. I approached another supplier and received three portions. I sold him two portions. Later he came to me for another portion. I found that trafficking drugs would bring me a substantial income, so I continued until I was caught. A regular texted me to meet him for the stuff. When I arrived, the CNB men were waiting to nab me. The regular was caught, and his handphone which had my number was used to trap me.

*

In 2014, I was sentenced to six years for drug trafficking, but the incarceration was reduced to four. Prison life turned out to be a blessing. It was in prison that I met the love of my life. It was also there that I studied for my A-levels and did well. My subjects were General Paper, Business Management, Principles of Accounting and Higher Malay. Except for General Paper, I received credits for the rest. In prison, I took my faith seriously, engaged in religious studies, and attended classes.

I was released in 2018. With help from Yellow Ribbon, I got a job as a wait staff. Yellow Ribbon also helped me to pursue a Diploma in Commerce with Kaplan Singapore – a higher education institute. In 2022, I obtained my Business Management and Business Law degree from Kaplan, affiliated with Murdoch University. I am now taking a Specialist Diploma in Corporate Secretarial Practice course at Temasek Polytechnic. I wouldn't have gone this far in my academic studies without help from Yellow Ribbon and SACA. Wati, my SACA case manager, helped me fill in forms and apply for a living allowance and is open to consultations.

*

After graduation, I applied for a job but was rejected after an interview. No reason was given. Before the interview, I had to fill in a form with a clause that required me to declare my criminal record. If the declaration was the cause for my rejection, it would be grossly unfair. I had paid the price for my wrongdoing. Shouldn't I be given a second chance?

Life is unpredictable, and I can't tell when another curveball will hit. I lost two loved ones through death. I have been rejected in job interviews. Looking back at my life, I could have resorted to drugs and trafficking again out of bitterness and anger.

However, organisations have helped me, and I need to pay it forward and live up to their expectations. As I am a pragmatic person, I believe in bouncing back instead of wallowing in self-pity. My late mother and partner would have wanted me that way. I know my strengths and my talents. Adversity has made me tougher. My criminal record should not deter me from moving forward. With will and perseverance, I can still make it in life and will continue to hold my head high.



Commentary

I find myself deeply moved by the incredible resilience the author displayed in turning adversity into strength, time and time again.

Mariam's unwavering determination to build, and rebuild, her life, further her education in prison and strive for academic and professional excellence despite significant loss and hardship is a true embodiment of grit. It is also testament to the power of grit and resilience in enduring and emerging stronger from the curveballs life throws our way.

Her story also demonstrates the transformative impact that empathy, support systems and strong belief in a person's ability to change have on individuals seeking to turn their lives around. This is why the work done by SACA, the Yellow Ribbon Project and other community service and rehabilitation groups is so important. They play a critical role in restoring hope and providing the resources, guidance, opportunities and above all, a community that is necessary

for individuals to rehabilitate, integrate socially and redefine their stories. That everyone deserves a second chance is an ethos we at Ishk strongly believe in too.

Ultimately, Mariam's story also encourages us to think about how each one of us can contribute to a more understanding, supportive and inclusive society. It challenges us to reconsider our perceptions of individuals who have faced legal and personal battles, and how we can be more empathetic and open in how we walk with them. Whether through advocacy, volunteering or simply extending curiosity, kindness, and understanding to the circumstances and lived experiences of those around us, we all can all play a role in supporting those who are striving to overcome their curveballs and write new chapters in their lives.

Divya Patel

Chief Executive Officer
Ishk Tolaram Foundation

*Blinded by love and the wrong
choice of partners led me to spiral
into 29 years of 6 imprisonments,
3 husbands, 4 children, and a life
of drug addiction.*



Flawed Relationships

Bibi's story
(Not her real name)

I met my first husband when he was working in Civil Defence as an office worker. I was introduced to him by a friend. We exchanged phone numbers, and soon we were calling each other daily. I could feel myself falling in love with him. He then invited me to his home to stay with him. I knew my parents would not allow me to stay with a male friend, so I lied to them that I had to meet a female friend. My parents were strict with me, and I wanted freedom from their control.

I packed a bag of some essentials and left home. I stayed with my boyfriend for the next two weeks and engaged in a sexual relationship. He was already into drugs and introduced it to me. I was curious, so I asked him to let me try. My parents found out my whereabouts and made me return home. By then, I was already hooked on drugs. Two months later, I found myself pregnant with his child. I was 19 years old. I married him, my first boyfriend, and drug consumption became part of our lives.

In 1994, I was arrested and incarcerated for one year for a drug-related offence. My husband was subsequently arrested as well. During this period, I also found out he had betrayed me. He was having an affair while married to me. I divorced him while he was in prison and took custody of my child.

In the next few years, I was in and out of prison. In 1996, I was imprisoned for 18 months. Unable to stop my addiction, I continued my drug consumption after my release. Under the influence of drugs, I was caught for shoplifting and was imprisoned for a few months. I wanted freedom; I needed to be high, and drugs could give me this. The friends I had were all into drugs. My fourth incarceration was in 1999, for three years and eight months.

In 2003, I met my second drug-addicted husband. I met him at the urine test center, and two months later, we married. He was still into drugs, refused to work and even brought friends into the home. The marriage ended in divorce three years later. We had three children by then. My children were four years, three years, and 18 months.

In 2010, I met my third husband. He was also into drugs; I also faced many issues with him. With three children and a husband to feed, I had to stretch my meagre salary as a cleaner. Life became increasingly unbearable, so I resorted to drugs for comfort and release. I was arrested in 2018 and imprisoned for seven years. The sentence was reduced because I agreed to undergo a drug rehabilitation programme.

Early Life

People like to assume that those who take drugs come from broken families and are brought up by abusive parents. This is not true, at least not in my case. I had a sheltered life as a child. I was surrounded by loving parents and grandparents and grew up with two other siblings.

My home was in Pulau Tekong, a peaceful island off mainland Singapore. Unlike today's HDB flats, we lived in a Malay kampong house, commonly known as an attap house because the roof is made of attap leaves. We were surrounded by vegetable, fruit and poultry farms and visited by animals such as wild boars and deer.

When I was 14, my family left for mainland Singapore, as the government wanted to use the island as a training ground for Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) recruits.

From a village school in Pulau Tekong, I was transferred to a vocational institute, where I learned various skills. It was a very different life from what I was used to. At age 15, I lost interest in studies and stayed home to help my mother look after my young sister. My parents supported my decision.

But staying home most of the time meant I was not exposed to the outside world. I often wondered what life could be like out there. Mine was boring, lonely, and friendless. I felt that there must be more to life than my daily routine. I envied people better off than me and neighbours who participated in fun activities.

At age 17, I joined a *kompang troop* that performed at weddings and cultural events. The troop would enter competitions. We won a competition and were given a free trip to Malacca. That was also my first exposure of life outside of Singapore.

The Morning After

A time of reckoning and deep reflection came when I was incarcerated for the sixth time in 2018. I had much to be thankful for, which made me determined not to return to my old life. I had the support of my husband and children. My husband who was off drugs by then, cared for the children during my incarceration. By then, my children were 28, 19, 18 and 16.

My children's continual visits while I was in prison, touched me. They did not judge me. We would cry whenever we met. The visits led me to decide to turn my life around. *I have to live for my children, I told myself, My children cannot live my kind of life. I want my kids to grow up well. I have to change.*

My father died at 72. I regretted being such a disappointment to him. As a daughter, I should have been there for him. Instead, I caused him pain because of my addiction. I visited him after my release. At his funeral in 2014, I was filled with remorse and wanted to give up living. My children stood by me and comforted me. I had to change as a way of repaying my father.

I am still attached to my mother and am grateful for her continual support. I want to see my mother until her death. I resolved to spend more time with my mother, husband, and children.

It was also in prison that my faith moved me. Prison allowed me to attend religious classes. I resolved to have more faith in God and to live a spiritual life. God is looking after me and has blessed me with good children.

The prison also matched me with a job while I was undergoing a rehabilitation programme. I became the administrative coordinator for the customer service of a pest control company. My job involves liaising with customers. I'm happy with the company as my colleagues treat me like family.

Organisations and individuals also helped me on my road to recovery. My counsellor from SACA, Allyah, is constantly in touch with me. She is patient, understanding, and motivates me. I also received support from my Reporting Officer from Selarang Camp.

In February 2023, I completed my programme and was given a full release. I am free from addiction and have resolved to remain so.

A New Beginning

I have entered into another phase of my life. I am now a new me. I want to be a better wife, mother, and daughter. Life is now much better with

support from the community, family members and colleagues. I see a sense of purpose in my life and plan to pay it forward by getting more involved in motivational talks. I have been invited to give talks about the evils of drug addiction. I help with the distribution of materials at exhibitions.

I tell others struggling with addiction:

You have to help yourself. You cannot give up. Only you can do it. Help is also available.

In five years, I see myself setting up a small business selling food. I want to be my own boss. I also intend to take up driving lessons. With a license, I can drive the company van.



Commentary

Bibi has shown great perseverance and strength in the face of multiple adversities and throughout her ordeals. The only time she crumbled was during her father's funeral. Through life adversities, Bibi found her inner strength to soldier on despite the odds. Bibi was with the wrong partners until she was acquainted with her current husband. I assumed that she longed for that love and affection that was absent in her life.

She could have had it worse by trafficking a large number of drugs given her affiliation with drug users but she consciously knew where to stop. Despite having minimal education, she was brave enough to take on the world by working as a cleaner. I know a couple of fair-weather friends who trafficked drugs rather than take on her job as they deemed it "demeaning".

A cocooned life has both its advantages and disadvantages. Bibi's sheltered life had robbed her of skills and knowledge. Her coping mechanism was abusing drugs when she was at her wit's end. But like most young people, they want to spread their wings to fly when they can. Without guidance, she ended up with the wrong crowd. Some parents think that by protecting and sheltering their children, nothing bad would harm them. But what is happening in our society now are rising suicide rates, and increasing mental issues that are left unnoticed until something tragic happens.

She endured her roller-coaster life, and that for me, is a Grammy award achievement! Amazingly, her children who have grown into young adults were still together and had strong faith in her change. This shows the strength of her family's bonds. Her children could have misbehaved

but they did not. These are life miracles we are witnessing. Bibi has successfully turned her life around with the help of her loved ones, prison officers, and SACA.

She has come to realise that it takes a community effort to turn the negative into positive and learned important life lessons, and she sees the light at the end of her dark tormenting tunnel.

Let me share a bit of my life's journey with all of the readers here. When my parents divorced, I was 8 years old. My siblings' and my lives came tumbling down. I have five siblings including a stepbrother. I am the black sheep in the family and I had spent a solid ten years in prison in total. Just like Bibi, my last incarceration was the turning point when I saw my mom age right before my eyes and it was painful to watch. Like most men, we have to

appear to be strong thus masking our vulnerabilities. The truth of the matter is we have our insecurities which we don't display because we don't want to be seen as weak.

I promised myself that I would be a successful, productive, and law-abiding citizen, a filial son, and a committed partner. All of these goals manifested when I spent five solid years in prison from 2015 to 2020. I achieved these goals in the end but it wasn't easy. SACA, my present partner Renee Chua, and some close great friends were my pillars. They were my community and without their help, I would be the same person as I was before and I would probably end up in prison. Now I am a certified counsellor with the Singapore Association of Counsellors.

There is no easy way out, period. If you want to be successful, you have

to put in the work, you need to have plans like Bibi. I am grateful to SACA for being one of the drivers in the successful transformation of the ex-inmates.

Mr Marcus Mohammad

When my teacher told me to draw my family tree, I struggled with it. Who do I include, and who do I exclude? Mine is a family of birth parents, step-parents, biological siblings, and step-siblings.



Abusive Relationships

Esah's story
(Not her real name)

Violence and abuse have been a part of my life since childhood. My parents divorced when I was a baby. Father remarried. Life became a round of abuse by my step-mother for my elder sister and me. *You must stay in your room and cannot talk to your father*, she would remind me. The abuse would continue throughout the day. Eat, she would scream at me when I had difficulty swallowing my food. *You think your father is printing money? You think you can waste food?* She would screech while using the water spray at me. One day, she threatened me with a knife when I refused to eat the food she forced on me. My father eventually came to know about the abuse, and he divorced her.

*

At the age of six, I received regular visits from a mysterious woman. She turned out to be my birth mother. Eventually, my mother sought permission from my father to allow my sister and me to stay at her home over the weekends. She had remarried. I knew she was my birth mother

when my stepfather said to me one day, *who do you think your birth mother is?* Pointing to the woman beside him, he continued, *she is the one.*

If you have been following dramatic, violent films on Netflix, my life can't be any worse. The drama would play out during my stay with my birth mother and stepfather, a policeman. One night, my stepfather came home to find mother missing. It was past midnight. He confronted her when she returned. I woke up to the sound of shattered glasses and plates. On reaching the kitchen, I heard abusive words being hurled, dishes and utensils swinging like flying saucers. The continual fights led to a divorce.

Mother remarried. Her third husband, a barber, was even more abusive and violent. Regardless of the consequences, mother would still go clubbing. Her night rendezvous continued, and fights would result. Whenever the noises began, I would creep out of bed to watch. He would hit, punch, and kick her while swearing at her. The next day, I could see bruises all over her body. The frequent dramas eventually led to a third divorce. Surprisingly mother remarried her second husband, the policeman who technically became her fourth husband.

*

Life has a way of repeating itself. The dramas I witnessed between my parents and stepparents repeated in my adult life. I 'married' an abusive and violent drug addict. He was a childhood friend I reconnected with at the ITE.

I was living with him for a period when his mother pressured us to get married rather than live in sin. The marriage was not recognised because it took place in Batam. I could not contact my birth father as he had remarried and lived with his third wife in Johor Bahru (JB). Without my father's consent and blessing, the marriage could not be registered in Singapore. I was 18 years old.

I learned about drugs online while sourcing information to work on my project. My partner, who was already an addict, initiated me into drugs. Life became rounds of drug consumption. By then, I was working in retail sales, but he would bug me when he couldn't get enough money to feed his cravings. Occasionally, he would beat me up when I couldn't give him enough, or he would steal my money. He even kept my passport to prevent me from going to Johor to look for my father.

To prevent the continual abuse and pestering, I made a pact with him that we would engage in drug trafficking for the money to feed our addiction. By then, I was pregnant with our son. I abstained from drug consumption during my pregnancy, but my partner made me continue after my childbirth. The fights resumed.

I was able to reconnect with my birth father through the help of a friend. When I told my father about my plight, he offered to take me back to JB. My son was left in the care of my mother-in-law. *You have to sacrifice to be happy*, my father said. Meanwhile, my partner was caught for drug trafficking and sentenced to three years in jail.

It was during this time that I met my boyfriend. We got into a relationship, and I became pregnant with my second child, a daughter. My boyfriend's family disliked me, so I stayed in his uncle's apartment. Both of them were on drugs. My boyfriend turned out to be abusive. He had absconded from National Service, had no income and was on the run.

In January 2019, the police came to my apartment, did a search, and arrested me for a drug-related offence. It was a matter of time. I was sentenced to five years imprisonment, but it was reduced to three years and four months. My daughter was left in the care of my boyfriend's mother. I was released in 2022.

*

I reflected deeply on the events in my life while incarcerated in Changi Prison. I've often wondered how much one's life results from one's doing and how much results from circumstances? I was abused as a child, but the pattern appears to be repeated in my adult life. I witnessed violence between my parents and stepparents and became a victim of violence.

The abuse and deprivation during my life with my step-mother taught me defiance and survival skills. At age eight, my step-mother would give me money and make me go to the sundry shop to buy groceries. I would cheat her by inflating the cost to pocket some extra cash. She would deny me whenever I asked for money to buy stationery. So, I resorted to stealing from the shops. It started with small items like pencils, erasers, and notebooks. Soon it escalated to more significant things, and by the time I became a teenager, I was a veteran shoplifter. Whenever I was

caught, my father would be called up, and I would be grounded or be caned by him, but it didn't deter me from continuing.

In my teens, I started mixing with gangs. We would hang out in the arcades, smoke, and play truant. I would lie to my father about having to attend extra classes in school but hung out with my gang members instead.

The first four months of prison life were utter misery. I was not allowed visitors, so it was very depressing. There were no letters either. I missed my children. In prison, I realised that I could not continue living a life of drugs. I had two children to take care of. *What kind of role model am I to them?* I asked myself.

It was also in prison that life took a turn for the better. Serving time in prison allowed me to pursue my education. I completed my O-levels and studied for my A-levels. My subjects were General Paper, Business Studies and Principles of Account.

After my release in 2023, I registered with Singapore Polytechnic and took a Diploma in Accounts, Internal Designing and Visual Communication.

*

Life may have thrown us a curveball, but how we respond makes a difference. I am not proud of my past life, but, as the saying goes, *you can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are*

and change the ending. I intend to live a meaningful and responsible life free from drugs because there is much to look forward to and live for:

- My two children need me.
- I have a stable career with a supportive boss.
- My father is still there for me.
- SACA and my case worker, Rui Yi, supports, encourages, and gives me continual advice.

To those who are still struggling with addiction, I have this to say:

Take control of your life because life can be beautiful if you manage it well.



Commentary

At the core of any change journey is the individual herself.

Reading Esah's story encouraged me greatly. She was dealt a challenging hand in life, having been abused as a child and seeing the pattern repeated in her adult life when she became a victim of violence in her intimate relationships. While incarcerated, she realised the need to change the trajectory of her life for her and her children's future and this served as motivation for her to apply herself fully to the rehabilitation programmes and education opportunities availed to her. I am glad to read that these positive shifts she experienced in prison have been sustained even after her release as she continues to upskill and build a brighter future for herself.

This sense of agency and hope that change is possible is important. Esah mentioned that, "You can't go

back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending". The past is unchangeable, but individuals can shape a different future by embracing opportunities for improvement and learning from experiences. Her children are an important source of motivation for her to change. By fostering self-awareness, breaking destructive patterns, and investing in positive choices, she has shown that she can become a role model for her children. We know from research that *families are key to desistance*; they can be a means of increasing social capital for the inmate, providing the motivation needed for change and sustaining prosocial behaviour, and reinforcing new social roles and identities. This is in line with research done by the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and

strengthening families is one of SPS's key strategies in the coming years so that more inmates and ex-offenders can draw strength from their families in their change journey.

Esah summed it up well when she wrote, *"Take control of your life because life can be beautiful if you manage it well."* Motivation and self-awareness are critical to start the change process, sustained by intentional choices to break away from the cycle of crime. Through her decision and commitment to change, Esah has also taken steps to mitigate the risk of intergenerational offending. An SPS study on intergenerational offending found that 1 in 5 offenders who are parents will see their children come into contact with the criminal justice system. Preventing intergenerational offending involves a multi-faceted approach, including early intervention, community

support, and addressing underlying factors, and SPS works with other government agencies and our community partners to address it. One example would be the Initiative for Incarcerated Mothers and Children (IIMAC) by SACA. This programme reaches out to all female inmates so that the necessary support and interventions can be provided to children and families in need. But the first step still needs to be taken by the individual to break him/ herself out of the cycle. I hope that many inmate parents will experience a similar awakening as Esah and use the opportunities for change in the prison to restart their lives and strengthen their families.

To Esah and many who may be in similar circumstances, I also want to say that you are not alone, for our society stands with you. 2024 marks the 20th anniversary of the Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP), a national

movement to spur society to give ex-offenders a second chance in life. In these last two decades, many individuals and organisations have supported the YRP and in so doing, have made a difference to the lives of inmates, ex-offenders and their families. SPS, together with our partners, will continue to mobilise the community so that ex-offenders can be supported by a strong ecosystem that promotes hope, resilience and second chances.

May each journey of healing and recovery be aided by strength and support from the community.

Ms Caroline Lim

Director, Rehabilitation &
Reintegration Division
Singapore Prison Service

*If I were born again,
I would want God to
make me a man who
can love a woman or a
complete woman who
can love a man.*



Alienation

Zelda's story
(Not her real name)

As a child, I preferred boys' clothes and hairstyles. I would dress more like a boy and feel comfortable in boys' clothes. By age nine, I sensed that my sexual orientation was different. I could not understand why I behaved differently from a typical female. I had no interest in boys.

I lived with shame. People would look at me, snigger, and pass remarks. They would call me a tomboy or other insulting names because of my haircut, dress, and behaviour.

At 16, I brought my girlfriend home. My mum disapproved and was embarrassed at my behaviour. She warned me not to behave intimately with my girlfriend when we were outside in case people started passing unkind remarks.

Alienation and rejection from the community spiralled into a life of crime and addiction.

*

During my infant years, my parents had to work, and I was placed in the care of my aunt. My dad was a cook in an army camp, and my mother was a factory worker. Mother would visit me for a few hours after work. I attended the same primary school as my two cousins. The younger cousin was protective of me whenever I was bullied.

At nine years old, my mother had an operation. I missed her and would cry to myself in the nights. It was also the beginning of my truancy. Instead of attending school, I would hang out at void decks and basketball courts. One day, my aunt caught me and punished me. By then, I was 11 years old, and I asked to return to my parents' home. I wanted a change of environment and more freedom.

Adjusting to the transition was difficult as my parents continued working, and I was left alone after school. I would still visit my aunt, feed the dog then go home. I continued my studies and completed my PSLE but lost interest. My relationship with my parents was distant. Mother was too busy with work and household chores, and father was non-communicative.

I lost interest in studies after Primary Six. I passed my PSLE but refused to continue in secondary school. For two years, I would hang out with friends at void decks, arcades, and basketball courts. Occasionally out of fun, we would commit trespassing by entering into 'No Entry' premises to defy authority and while away the time. I began playing basketball with

these friends, and they soon introduced me to glue-sniffing. It started out of curiosity, but I soon became hooked.

To be accepted by these friends was important to me. I wanted a sense of belonging; I had only them, so I went along with their activities. At that rebellious age, values taught in school did not register with me. I did whatever made my friends and me happy without thinking much about the consequences.

Besides glue-sniffing, we would engage in shoplifting. We would enter a shop and pick up whatever we fancied. Most of the time, it would be sports materials. Despite the presence of sales personnel and the installation of mirrors, we were not caught. This went on until one of us was caught for snatch theft and made to confess. The police raided our homes and discovered some of the stolen items. I was brought home in handcuffs. My mum was shocked. As I was only 12 years old, the police gave only a stern warning after making me surrender all the stolen items.

*

At 16, the juvenile court placed me on a 15-month probation in a hostel for glue-sniffing. I breached the probation, absconded, and stayed with friends who introduced me to a gaming job. I was involved in activities related to Internet cafes. They operated like illegal casinos. Customers would put a deposit and engage in illegal online betting. I played the role of cashier. At one time, \$2,000 in cash went missing. My co-worker denied taking the amount, and I was too high on drugs to account for the

missing cash. My mother paid to get me out of further trouble. She did not scold me but was anxious for me instead.

From glue-sniffing, I graduated to drugs. When money was needed to feed my addiction and lifestyle, my friends introduced me to car break-ins. We would operate in groups of three and target terrace houses. Most owners would lock their gates but not their cars. After climbing the gate, I would steal the cash card in the car. My accomplice would steal other gadgets such as mobile devices. The third person would be on the lookout.

After cashing out from the ATM, we could collect about \$1,000 in one night's taking. We shared out the money. We would strike between 1am and 4am when the residents were likely asleep. This went on for a year until one of us was caught and made to reveal our whereabouts.

This time I was sentenced to Singapore Girls' Home. I took my Secondary One exam there and attended courses in culinary skills. After a year, I was allowed to study outside but had to report to the Girls' Home for the night. However, I was still into drugs. Drugs were still a fun thing for me. I studied at the Girls' Home and got my GCE N-level certificate at the end of the two years. At 19, I was released from the Girls' Home and was given a job as an apprentice in a Japanese restaurant. I learnt from scratch and suffered cuts and scars.

In 2015, I was incarcerated. I had met up with an old friend and was lured into drugs again. I didn't stop until she was caught too and put in the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC). The place was dirty. We were cramped in a

dormitory and slept on bunk beds with no mattresses. The intention was to deter us, but I returned to drugs after my release and was rearrested in 2017. In 2020, I was arrested yet again, imprisoned for one year and placed in the Selarang Camp programme.

I hated myself whenever I failed to give up my drug habit. Working in the kitchen as a chef was hard work, and I would resort to drugs as an excuse to relieve stress. One day, I told my mother I didn't want to live this life anymore, so I threw away my drugs. It did not last.

My relapse could last for days, weeks and even months. It came when I had problems with work and had to deal with debts because of my spending habits and addiction. I could feel I was losing myself. I knew I had to get back on track before it was too late. I would need to seek help.

*

My wake-up call came when I had to escort my partner, K, to prison. I felt very guilty and remorseful. I had been in a relationship with K, a former drug addict. K managed to get out of drugs and played the role of encourager and supporter to help me overcome my dependency. Whenever I felt frustrated or stressed, I would resort to drugs, and K would stand by me. She didn't give up on me. The continual support and encouragement took a toll on K, and in a moment of deep anger, frustration and weakness, K succumbed to drugs and was caught. In September 2022, K was incarcerated. Every two weeks, I would accompany K's father to visit her.

Initially, K had resisted arrest, but I persuaded her to accept and face imprisonment, assuring her that she could look forward to a better future with me upon her release. I realised that life could only get better with K if I decided to change. It was then that I realised I could not live the life of an addict and expect continual help and support if I didn't help myself. I made the solemn promise to K that I would change. The suffering I had caused K and the overwhelming guilt became the turning point of my life. I was the one who got her back to prison. I hope K will see a different me when she is released.

Only a drug addict can understand a drug addict. I'm already 30. I have my dreams. Let me fulfill one. Every year, my birthday wish is to stop taking drugs. I don't worry about making money but about my drug problem. If I don't change, I will be in and out of prison. My greatest regret in life is taking drugs.

Besides K, it is my mother, who never gave up on me. My mother is getting old. I want to be there for her. My relationship with my father remains distant, but I'm close to my mother. She is a long-suffering woman who bore continual pain and despair because of my misdeeds. My mother would give me money, bail me out, visit me and give me love and support without fail.

SACA has also been helping me on the road to recovery. Charmaine, my counsellor, has been a pillar of strength. One day, I relapsed and was high on drugs in Sentosa on a video call with Charmaine. She did not judge me but encouraged me to stay strong. Sometimes all I need is a listening ear. I confide in Charmaine, and I'm comfortable with her.

A New Beginning

Today, I still have a long way to go. For the sake of my loved ones, I am open to therapy and determined to change. I can survive in any kitchen with my culinary skills, but it is the drug problem that I must keep overcoming.

I have this to say to those who are still struggling with addiction: Seek help. We are not strong enough to handle this alone. If there's a will, there's a way. It will be a challenging journey, but you can still reach there if you don't give up. You are not alone.

Five years into the future, I see myself living with K, getting an HDB home and a car. With a car, I can take my mother out. I also want to be a sous chef in charge of a few outlets.

A Letter to K

Dearest K,

I am where I am today because of you. Your unconditional love, forgiveness, sacrifices, and not giving up on me brought me to where I am today.

I am sorry for all the wrong things that I have done in the past. Trust me; I am a better person now. And I will keep trying to be a better person for you and mum. I am prouder of you than I am proud of myself. Without you, things will not be the same. With you, I might be doing what I am

doing now. Just the thought of you and our future together gives me the strength to keep going on and not repeat the same mistakes anymore. Things will not be easy, but we will not give up; we will get through it together.

Thank you for everything, my love. I promise to be a better me.

*Love,
Zelda*



Commentary

I read Zelda's story with keen interest. Her story makes me reflect on the way our society treats people who are different from the majority. Her experiences indicate the need for everyone to give respect and space to others in society, irrespective of their physical appearance, gender, or sexual orientation.

I see a confused child in Zelda. Zelda's state of melancholic isolation as a young child, and her ardent wish to be "a man" or a "complete woman" in her next birth is touching. Her emotional turmoil is painful. She possibly felt this way because she was not accepted by those around her or respected by society as an equal as she looked and behaved differently from the majority. Little Zelda "lived with shame" as she was taunted and harassed by the public. This highlights the importance of respecting those who are different

rather than the majority expecting the minority to follow them.

I think Zelda would not have committed the offenses if she had someone to guide her instead of leaving her all alone to make immature decisions in life. At one point, Zelda says that alienation and rejection led her to crime. Is Zelda a victim of society or is it something else that made her turn to crime and addiction? This is a point that the readers of Zelda's story and the society at large should reflect on. The absence of her parents in Zelda's earlier life has made a deep impact on her that would have encouraged her to look for something else to fill that void. This highlights the importance of family and the children's need for parental care.

Zelda's tendency to defy authority that gradually led her to glue-sniffing

was also evidence of the lack of guidance and a role model for her in life. She longed for acceptance and care. All that Zelda wanted was to have a "sense of belonging" which she lacked in most of her early life. To achieve this sense of belonging, she was willing to make any sacrifice irrespective of whether her choices were right or wrong. As she did not have high ambitions as a young adult, she lived for the moment, without being concerned about the consequences of her thoughtless actions, resulted by the lack of care and guidance.

Zelda's early life tells us that getting into illegal activities can also cause pain to loved ones. The deep pain that Zelda's actions brought to her mother was shocking. When Zelda was held responsible for a large amount of money that was lost at her workplace, only her mother was

there for her. The mother would have gone through a lot of pain raising the amount to avoid trouble for Zelda. Illegal activities have ripple effects on not only the offenders but also on their loved ones.

Although the system is generally empathetic towards young offenders to change themselves, drug offenders need strong support from family and society to mend their lives. Once hooked on drugs, there is no easy way out as the lure of drugs is too strong as seen from the repeated offending by Zelda. Without strong support, drug offenders might suffer a relapse into criminal life that can gradually lead to self-hatred. Debts are also a part of drug life caused by excessive spending habits to feed their addiction.

Drug offenders need determination and external support to wean off their drug addiction. Ex-offenders can be support-providers as in the case of Zelda, who acted as a support to her partner who was in prison. This highlights the importance of ex-offenders being key players and volunteers in helping drug addicts wean off their addiction. The role of SACA volunteers to provide a listening ear to offenders is emphasised by Zelda. Emotional support, determination, strong willpower, and the belief that you are not alone in life are the keys to success.

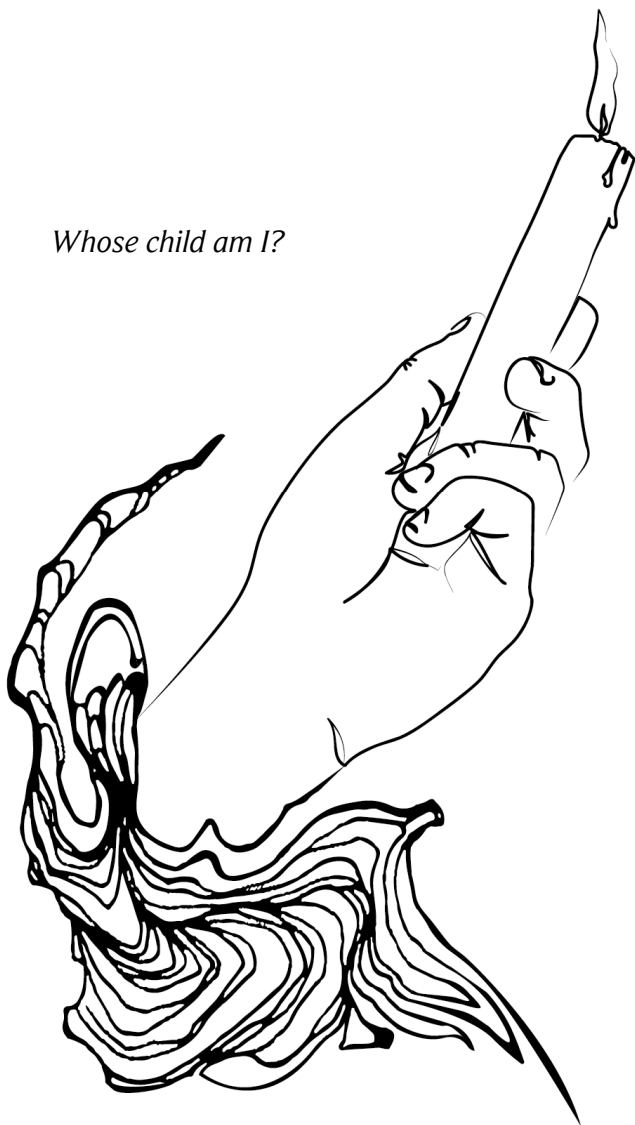
Being a SACA volunteer, reading Zelda's story prepares me to relate with potential SACA clients who might be in Zelda's position. Her life experiences signal the troubles and tribulations that people like her face in a society where individuals

with differences are ostracised and stigmatised. Her story indicates the importance of welcoming and accepting everyone as one of us and as part of our society.

Dr Bobby Sebastian Kappen

Volunteer After-Care Officer, SACA

Whose child am I?



Rejection

Daisy's story
(Not her real name)

This question had haunted me since the day I discovered the adoption papers. One day, my parents told me to sort out some documents as they were illiterate. That was when I found out the truth about my birth. I was 15. The shocking realisation that I was adopted confirmed the years of speculation and suspicion that I was not my parents' child. Neighbours used to tease and say openly that I didn't look like my parents. It didn't help that my father would add fuel to the flame with remarks like: *If I had known you would be so naughty, I wouldn't have picked you out from the dustbin.*

Rejection became a part of who I am. Continual rejection from parents and later schoolmates pushed me into a state of despair, worthlessness and later, defiance.

An only child adopted by a construction worker father and a seamstress mother, I received neither affection nor emotional support. From young, I kept things in my heart. I cannot recall any happy memories with my parents.

Father worked long hours and was non-communicative. When I was around, he was at work. When I was asleep, he returned. One day, I was at a shopping mall with my father. I pointed to a doll which I wanted. *What for?* came his answer. When I started crying, he slapped me to shut me up. After that I never asked for anything again. My mother would tell me, *I give you education, food, and shelter. That should be enough.* My parents would cane me over small offences like spilling soup on the table. Loneliness, depression, and negative thoughts plagued me throughout my childhood.

I used to envy my classmates whose parents brought them food during recess. Like every child, I wanted to be loved, to be cuddled by my parents, to be read bedtime stories. Oftentimes I cried myself to sleep. I had no one to confide in, and no one cared.

At 11, a stranger molested me. He pretended to be a policeman and told me he had to do a body search. He took me to a secluded place and started feeling parts of my body. I sensed that something was wrong, pushed him away and fled. When I told my mother about it, she just ignored it. I suffered recurring nightmares over the incident.

My mother's way of discipline was to nag, nag, nag. My growing-up years were just rounds of nagging and quarrels escalating into shouting

matches. Life became just one immense pain. I would match it with physical pain by slashing my wrists with a penknife. I took pleasure in seeing the blood oozing from the self-inflicted wound. One day, out of abject despair, I wanted to end the years of rejection, neglect, and worthlessness. I popped 40 Panadol tablets but didn't die. My mother found me lying unconscious and rushed me to the hospital.

Rejection continued into my school life. I was the target of bullying by classmates. They would take away my table or hide my books. Whenever I complained to my mother, she would only say, *don't care about them*. The continual abuse led to pessimism, negativity, and withdrawal. Once, a boy pushed a table against me. The impact made me breathless, and the school called for an ambulance. The bullying continued in secondary school, but this time I was older and learnt to retaliate. I joined a gang to garner support.

Boyfriends, Sex, and Drugs

From an introvert and a victim of bullying, I changed into an uncontrollable delinquent. I engaged in smoking, truancy, shoplifting, and graduated to clubbing.

At 14, I ran away from home and stayed in a friend's flat for a week until my parents found my whereabouts and brought me home. Life took on rounds of boyfriends, sex, and vice – a retaliation to the curveball life threw at me. I led a reckless and carefree life.

At 28, a boyfriend initiated me into drugs. Drugs gave me the energy to engage in my wild life. I searched the Internet to google the drugs before

deciding the type I want to take. To feed my addiction, I worked in a few part-time jobs. My mother also gave me money. She knew I would steal if she denied me.

I was made pregnant by one of my boyfriends, carried the child, a son, to full term, and eventually married his father, a drug addict. Four years later, we separated, but I had custody of the child. Years later, I became pregnant again by another boyfriend while still married to the first and gave birth to a second child. In between, I had a few miscarriages.

Incarcerations

In Secondary 3, I appeared before the Juvenile Court for a series of offences. The judge remanded me at the Toa Payoh Girls' Home for 30 months. Diagnosed with depression, I received counselling but refused to take the medication. It was there that I learnt office skills. Upon my release, I resumed my wayward life.

One day, out of desperation, my parents reported me to the police. This time I was incarcerated in the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC). The judge said *I'm a moral danger to the public*. After one year in DRC, they released me.

My second incarceration in DRC was in 2019, two months after I had given birth to my second child. I had resumed my drug consumption, and CNB officers arrested me.

It was in DRC that I experienced the darkest moments of my life. I missed my children, especially the baby. After my arrest, the baby was left in the

care of his father's mother as my mother was still working. Each time my mother visited, she would tell me negative news about my in-law's treatment of the baby. I missed my elder son who used to feed the baby – he would tell me, *Mummy, you have to burp baby*.

While in DRC I received a lawyer's letter saying that the baby's father wanted full custody of the child because I was an incompetent mother. Before my incarceration, he had told me we would talk things out after my release. I didn't expect him to be so sneaky. I felt betrayed.

To add to my woes, my eldest son, who has dyslexia and attachment disorder, had difficulty living without me. But it was also in the midst of pain and despair that I experienced enlightenment.

Breakthrough

The breakthrough came during my second incarceration in DRC. A series of incidents made me determined to change and live for my children.

After years of rejection and being assessed as *a moral danger to the public*, I experienced kindness and understanding from two prison officers who saw me as a human being needing help. Whenever they saw me experiencing a panic attack in my cell, they would take me out and talk to me. I also chose to take up the programme offered by the prison to hasten my release. This programme is a series of activities which an inmate has to undergo and achieve. Upon completion, the sentence can be reduced.

I sought help from Legal Aid after receiving the lawyer's letter about total child custody for the father. The judge, who showed sympathy and understanding, advised me to take care of myself, including my health. SACA helped me to gain a job as a weaver. The court granted me shared child custody, but the child will remain with the father's parents, although I have weekend access.

While in prison, elderly cell mates would share their experiences. They remained hooked on drugs as there was nothing to look forward to. Their children had abandoned them. I realised that I had to live for my two boys. I chose to give them life. My elder son doesn't even have a father. His surname is not on his birth certificate. If I want to set an example for the boys, I have to be responsible and fight for shared custody. I don't want the brothers to be separated.

There was also the change in my parents' attitude towards me. One day, my father said, *I love you*. I was like, WHAT?

A New Beginning

Life has a way of knocking you down. Some people bounce back, but others never recover. My story is about a life of rejection, falling into the pit, and struggling to survive before building my resilience and facing a new beginning. The encouragement and help from organisations and people who still believe in me gave me the push to face the world today.

SACA has been a continual source of help and support. My counsellor, Charmaine, befriended me and built up my confidence. The counselling is still ongoing. SACA subsidised my Beauty and Wellness course and gave

me an allowance. Through SACA, I have received invitations to attend events and share my experiences as a volunteer speaker.

My past is part of my journey; the future is where I want to go. I want to help others, so they won't follow my path. I would search the Internet for organisations that befriend high-risk youths. I meet up with these youths, talk to them about the choices they can make, but I don't tell them what to do.

I have this to say to those still struggling with addiction:

I understand what you are going through; I was there. If there's someone to stand by you, nothing is impossible. You may fall, but you can pick yourself up. Help is available.

Five years into the future, I see myself as a life coach or a counsellor to drug addicts. I hope to start a small online handicraft business, and with a certificate in Beauty and Wellness, I can be a home beautician.

At long last, I see light at the end of my dark, dark tunnel.

Commentary

The narrative of Daisy's tumultuous journey is a stark portrayal of the profound impact of rejection, neglect, and abuse on an individual's life trajectory. From her earliest years, Daisy grappled with the absence of love, care, and understanding, as her parents, weighed down by their own material struggle, found it hard to provide the nurturing environment she desperately needed. The dearth of communication further isolated her, leaving her vulnerable to various forms of abuse – physical, emotional, and sexual.

Throughout her formative years, Daisy found herself trapped in a cycle of victimisation, enduring bullying and torment at school that only served to compound her sense of worthlessness and despair. The cumulative trauma pushed her to a crisis point, where she contemplated

ending her life in a desperate bid to escape the relentless pain and rejection. To overcome the pain, shame and guilt, she engaged in maladaptive behaviours such as engaging in drugs, parties, and non-committal relationships, but more than these being expressions of deviance, they were desperate cries for help and attention in the absence of healthier avenues for support and validation.

The pivotal turning point in Daisy's narrative came with her encounters with compassionate individuals and support networks that extended a lifeline of hope and connection. The prison officers who saw her not as a criminal but as a human being in need of help, the judge who granted her joint custody of her child, and organisations like SACA that believed in her potential and provided guidance and support –

these were the catalysts for Daisy's journey toward redemption and resilience.

Reflecting on Daisy's story, we are compelled to confront the intergenerational deprivation and structural inequalities that perpetuate cycles of trauma and marginalisation among vulnerable populations. Daisy's narrative underscores the critical importance of trauma-informed interventions, holistic support systems, and compassionate advocacy in breaking the cycle of abuse and fostering healing and empowerment.


As we bear witness to Daisy's journey of growth, we are reminded of the transformative power of empathy, solidarity, and collective action in creating a more just and compassionate society where every individual is valued, supported, and

given the opportunity to thrive.

In Daisy's resilience, we find hope – a beacon of light illuminating the path toward healing, growth, and redemption for all who have endured the darkness of trauma and despair.

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The stories of these eight women shed light on the adversity and fraught personal circumstances that eventually led each of them to fall foul of the law. But these are also stories of remarkable strength and resilience, and they give reason for hope. They show how difficult it can be to break free from the cycles of addiction, violence, abuse and neglect that often contribute to criminal behaviour – but they also show that, with courage and resolve, these formidable challenges *can* be overcome.

Sundaresh Menon

Chief Justice of Singapore

